



Federal Update for November 16 - 20, 2015



VA Secretary to Announce VA-Bob Woodruff Foundation Partnership

WASHINGTON – Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Secretary Robert A. McDonald this evening will announce a partnership with the [Bob Woodruff Foundation](#) (BWF) to further advance VA’s outreach to Veterans through deeper and more innovative local and community partnerships. VA will capitalize on BWF’s strength and contacts to find unique ways to connect Veterans, transitioning Servicemembers and their families with resources right where they live. The partnership with BWF is one of many strategic alliances VA is forming and is an integral goal of the MyVA initiative, the largest reorganization in VA’s history which reorients VA around the needs of Veterans.

“We believe that by working together we can create a ‘single front door,’ or a convenient community point of entry, to help Veterans gain access to the benefits they have earned in addition to the resources unique to their local communities,” said Secretary McDonald. “This partnership creates a more robust integration of federal, state and local governments, non-profit organizations, businesses and other local partners at the community level. By combining and sharing our efforts and expertise, I believe this partnership can help us better serve our nation’s Veterans – together.”

“Our nation’s transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans and their families each have unique needs, making the resources and services dedicated to overcoming their challenges all the more necessary,” said BWF Executive Director Anne Marie Dougherty. “We are excited by this opportunity to work in partnership with VA to reach Veterans and their families where they live and to deliver high-impact programs to support sustainable success.”

The Bob Woodruff Foundation is a nonprofit organization working on behalf of injured Servicemembers, Veterans and their families. Since 2006, BWF has invested nearly \$30 million in programs reaching more than 2 million injured Servicemembers, Veterans and their families in three key areas: Education and Employment, Rehabilitation and Recovery, and Quality of Life. For more information about the Foundation, visit www.bobwoodrufffoundation.org. For more information about VA including the MyVA initiative, visit www.va.gov.

Commissary Elimination Update ► DoD Concludes Not Necessary

Defense officials have concluded that a merger or consolidation of the military's commissary and exchange systems is not necessary, said the official leading the efforts to find taxpayer savings in the department's resale operations. "We believe we can get efficiencies without consolidation," said Peter Levine, the Defense Department's deputy chief management officer, speaking to the annual convention of the American Logistics Association. Defense officials, spurred by lawmakers' rejection of DoD proposals over the last couple of years to drastically cut the level of taxpayer dollars that operate military commissaries, have changed the way they are looking at the stores, Levine said. Defense officials had proposed cutting \$1 billion of the roughly \$1.4 billion annual commissary operating budget, a proposal perceived as being driven by the need for money, rather than the need for reform. Exchanges operate for the most part without taxpayer funding.

The thinking among DoD officials also has been colored by recent recommendations from the Military Retirement and Compensation Modernization Commission and the Boston Consulting Group. Studies by both groups recommended consolidating the commissary and exchange systems. However, both studies also concluded that DoD can attain significant savings without reducing the benefit to the military community. Lawmakers were concerned that focusing on cutting taxpayer dollars would directly result in a cut to the commissary benefit — the significant saving customers enjoy in those stores compared to off-base grocery stores. Those taxpayer dollars, which cover commissary operating costs, enable the stores to sell groceries at cost, giving military patrons an average of about 30 percent savings over civilian stores outside the gates. Now, Levine said officials will "look for efficiencies first and let efficiencies drive the budget, rather than the other way around."

Over the next six months, a new Defense Retail Business Optimization Board will review a number of recommendations for efficiencies, looking at areas of common business practices, such as acquisition and warehouse systems, and develop a plan for these savings, Levine said. The board includes the leaders of the exchange and commissary systems. But legislative change also is needed, Levine said, including a more flexible pricing system — also known as variable pricing — in which officials are allowed to raise prices on some items and lower them on others. By law, items in commissaries now must be sold at cost, defined as what the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) pays for the item from the manufacturer or distributor. Customers also pay a five percent surcharge at cash registers, which is used to fund store construction and renovation.

Defense officials also want legislative authority to allow DeCA to sell its own private-label items. "It doesn't do DeCA any good to do [that] under the current pricing system," Levine said. While a private label does require oversight and marketing within the organization, the idea is that these items would give patrons another savings option, while also providing DeCA some ability

to make a profit that would cover some operations costs. Levine said officials also are looking at ways to expand the customer base, but did not elaborate on that point. A proposal in the pending 2016 defense authorization bill would require DoD to come up with a plan to operate the commissaries without taxpayer dollars by fiscal 2018, while maintaining the customer benefit. DoD has determined that the most that can be cut out of the commissary budget by that time is \$300 million, a little over 21 percent of the current annual operating budget. "The only way to get \$1.1 billion in additional savings is by reducing savings, closing stores or both," Levine said. "My message is that we can't take that drastic step and expect to maintain the benefit." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | October 27, 2015 ++]

Commissary Funding ► Catch 22

In budget cutting exercises, commissaries are often easy pickings for the chopping block. Critics say the \$1.4 billion Congress spends on groceries for military families could be better spent on other purposes. The almost 12 million patrons authorized to use the commissary tell a different story. Being able to buy groceries at cost, with a five percent surcharge, can save military families big bucks. DeCA, the Defense Commissary Agency, estimates that a military family of four can save almost \$3,000 a year. This year's defense bill calls for DoD to figure out how to make the commissary system cost neutral. The report, due in March, will look at how DoD can privatize commissaries while keeping the same level of customer savings and satisfaction. It will also look at strategically closing commissaries in markets with competing shopping options, and the willingness of commercial grocers to provide eligible commissary patrons discounts.

If cutting funding without increasing costs for consumers seem like conflicting ideas, it's because they are. It's unlikely that commissaries will be able to take the budget cut without passing the buck to shoppers. "The language of the report establishes standards that are impossible to meet," said Karen Golden, Deputy Director at MOAA.

Commissary patrons are particularly sensitive to price fluctuations. For many commissary shoppers, particularly junior enlisted members without access to off base shopping, they are literally a captive audience. According to RAND, a consultancy, "the elimination of the appropriation, while reducing the DoD budget, comes at a cost borne primarily by those currently and formerly in the armed forces."

RAND's findings go on to note that increasing commissary pricing may have negative effects on retention and recruitment, cuts to Morale, Well-Being, and Recreation programs, and possible changes in the calculated cost of living adjustment. Previously, some national chains expressed willingness to provide discounts to military families to match commissary prices. But to date, no major retailer has made good on the offer. After the report, DoD has the authority to launch a two year study on privatization in five of the largest stateside commissary markets. [Source: MOAA | Jamie Naughton | Oct 2015 ++]

DoD Lawsuit ► Veterans Used in Secret Experiments Sue

American service members used in chemical and biological testing have some questions: What exactly were they exposed to? And how is it affecting their health? Tens of thousands of troops were used in testing conducted by the U.S. military between 1922 and 1975. As one Army scientist explained, the military wanted to learn how to induce symptoms such as "fear, panic, hysteria, and hallucinations" in enemy soldiers. Recruitment was done on a volunteer basis, but the details of the testing and associated risks were often withheld from those who signed up. Many of the veterans who served as test subjects have since died. But today, those who are still alive are part of a class action lawsuit against the Army. If they're successful, the Army will have to explain to anyone who was used in testing exactly what substances they were given and any known risks. The Army would also have to provide those veterans with health care for any illnesses that result, in whole or in part, from the testing.

The law firm representing the veterans estimates at least 70,000 troops were used in the testing, including World War II veterans exposed to mustard gas, whom NPR reported on earlier this summer. Bill Blazinski has chronic lymphocytic leukemia, which he thinks may have been caused by the military tests. He was 20 years old when he volunteered in 1968. "There would be a guaranteed three-day pass every weekend unless you had a test," he says. "There would be no kitchen police duties, no guard duties. And it sounded like a pretty good duty." What sounded more like a vacation than military duty quickly changed, he says. In one test, doctors said they would inject him with an agent and its antidote back to back. "We were placed in individual padded cells. And you know the nurse left and I'm looking at this padded wall and I knew it was solid but all of a sudden started fluttering like a flag does up on a flag pole," he recalls. To learn about what substances made him hallucinate, in 2006, Blazinski requested the original test documents under the Freedom of Information Act. "It showed an experimental antidote for nerve agent poisoning with known side effects, and another drug designed to reverse the effects of the first," he says.

Researchers kept information about which agents they were administering from test subjects to avoid influencing the test results. A lawyer representing the veterans, Ben Patterson of the law firm Morrison and Foerster, says that's a problem. "They don't know what they were exposed to. You know, some of these substances were only referred to by code names," Patterson says. Code names such as CAR 302668. That's one of the agents, records show that researchers injected into Frank Rochelle in 1968. During one test, Rochelle remembers that the freckles on his arms and legs appeared to be moving. Thinking bugs had crawled under his skin, he tried using a razor blade from his shaving kit to cut them out. After that test, he says he hallucinated for 40 hours. "There were animals coming out of the walls," he says. "I saw a huge rabbit and he was solid white with red eyes."

In 1975, the Army's chief of medical research admitted to Congress that he didn't have the funding to monitor test subjects' health after they went through the experiments. Since then, the military says it has ended all chemical and biological testing. Test subjects like Rochelle say that's not enough. "We were assured that everything that went on inside the clinic, we were going to be under 100 percent observation; they were going to do nothing to harm us," he says. "And also we were sure that we would be taken care of afterwards if anything happened. Instead we were left to hang out to dry." The Department of Justice is representing the Army in the case and declined to comment for this story. In June, an appeals court ruled in favor of the veterans. On 4 SEP, the Army filed for a rehearing. [Source: NPR | Caitlin Dickerson | September 5, 2015 ++]

GTMO Prison Update ► Obama 2008 Campaign Closure Promise

Congress will use every tool in its toolbox to block the White House from unilaterally closing the military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ warned on 5 NOV. A day after the White House refused to rule out acting along to close the controversial facility, the Senate Armed Services Committee chairman said that it was “disgraceful” that the administration would sidestep Capitol Hill. “It’s disgraceful, because I have asked for six and a half years for this administration to come forward with a plan — a plan that we could implement and close Guantanamo,” McCain told reporters off the Senate floor on Thursday.

McCain himself has tried to close the Cuban facility. “He lies when he says that he really wants to close Guantanamo with the cooperation of Congress, because he’s never sent over a plan,” McCain continued. On 4 NOV, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said that he would “not take anything off the table” with regard to Guantanamo. Closing the military detention facility was a 2008 campaign promise of President Obama’s that remains unfulfilled. The administration has transferred a handful of detainees out of the facility in recent days, which could be interpreted as new momentum on the controversial issue. There are currently 112 detainees remaining at Guantanamo Bay. According to reports, the White House is preparing to unveil a new plan in the coming days to close the prison.

“That plan should be approved by Congress,” McCain said on Thursday. “They’re going to try and do it by executive order. You’re going to see attempts by Congress to reverse that, including [through] funding mechanisms.” Obama vetoed a defense policy bill last month, partly because of language restricting where Guantanamo prisoners could be moved. A new version of the bill — which kept those restrictions but reversed course on budgetary maneuvers — sailed through the House on Thursday. The president has indicated he will not veto the new version over its Guantanamo Bay provision. [Source: The Hill | Julian Hattem | November 5, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► 7 Oklahoma Crewmembers Identified

The remains of seven crew members missing since the USS Oklahoma capsized in the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor have been identified, the military said Monday. The names of the servicemen identified using dental records will be released after their families have been notified. In June, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency began digging up the remains of nearly 400 USS Oklahoma sailors and Marines from a veterans cemetery in Honolulu where they were buried as "unknowns." Within five years, officials expect to identify about 80 percent of the Oklahoma crew members still considered missing. The military says it started the project because advances in forensic science and technology are improving the ability to identify remains. On 9 NOV, officials exhumed the last four of 61 caskets containing unknown people from the Oklahoma. Many of the caskets include the remains of multiple individuals.

Families will have the option of receiving remains as they are identified, or waiting until the agency has more pieces of a body or even a complete skeleton. Navy casualty officers will let families know their options. Altogether, 429 men on board the World War II battleship were killed. Only 35 were identified in the years immediately after. Identification work will be conducted at agency laboratories in Hawaii and Nebraska. DNA analysis will be conducted at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. More than 2,400 sailors, Marines and soldiers were killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Oklahoma's casualties were second only to the USS Arizona, which lost 1,177 men.

[Source: The Associated Press | Audrey McAvoy | November 9, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515) Korean War (7,841), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,627), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on 'Our Missing'. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs
- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>

Vietnam

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 1 OCT that the remains of three U.S. servicemen, missing from the Vietnam War, have been identified and will be buried with full military honors. Army Maj. Dale W. Richardson, 28, of Mount Sterling, Ill.; Staff Sgt. Bunyan D. Price Jr., 20, of Monroe, N.C.; and Sgt. Rodney L. Griffin, 21, of Mexico, Mo, have been accounted for. Price was buried Apr. 11 in Belmont, N.C.; Griffin was buried Apr. 25 in his hometown; Richardson was buried Aug. 29 in Mountain View, Ark.; and the group remains representing the crew will be buried Oct. 20 in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington D.C.

Richardson, Price, and Griffin, all assigned to 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, were passengers aboard an UH-1H Iroquois (Huey) helicopter that was en route to Fire Support Base Katum, South Vietnam, when it was diverted due to bad weather. After flying into Cambodian airspace, the aircraft came under heavy enemy ground fire, causing the pilot to make an emergency landing in Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia. The Huey's four crewmen and its four passengers survived the landing. One crewman was able to evade being captured by enemy forces and later returned to friendly lines. The other three crewmen and one passenger were captured. Two of the captured crewmen were released by the Vietnamese in 1973, and the remains of the other two captured men were returned to U.S. control in the 1980s and identified. Richardson, Price, and Griffin died at the site of the crash during a fire fight with enemy forces. Their remains were not recovered after the fire fight.

From 1992 through 2008, joint U.S./Kingdom of Cambodia (K.O.C.) teams investigated the site without success. On Feb. 18, 2009, a joint team interviewed witnesses in the Memot District of Cambodia who claimed to have information on the loss. The witnesses identified a possible burial site for the unaccounted for servicemen. The team excavated the burial site but was unsuccessful locating the remains. From Jan. 16, 2010 to March 11, 2011, joint U.S./K.O.C. teams excavated the area, but were unsuccessful recovering the crewman's remains. In February 2012, another joint U.S./K.O.C. team re-interviewed two of the witnesses. The witnesses identified a secondary burial site near the previously excavated site. The team excavated the secondary burial site and recovered human remains and military gear from a single grave. In the identification of Richardson, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) analyzed circumstantial evidence and used forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his sister. In the identification of Price, scientists from DPAA and AFDIL analyzed circumstantial evidence and used forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his brothers and sisters. In the identification of Griffin, scientists from DPAA and AFDIL analyzed circumstantial evidence and used forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his brothers.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains belonging to Navy Lt. j.g. Neil B. Taylor, 26, of Rangeley, Maine, who will be buried in his hometown with full military honors on Sept. 14, exactly 50 years after the A-4C Skyhawk he was piloting crashed while on a bombing mission over Bac Lieu Province, Vietnam, on Sept. 14, 1965.

Korea

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 9 OCT that the remains of serviceman U.S. Army Cpl. Robert E. Meyers, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Cpl. Myers, of Greencastle, Pennsylvania, will be buried 26 OCT, in Arlington National Cemetery. Meyers, assigned to Company A, 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, was declared missing in action, Dec. 1, 1950, after his unit was involved in combat operations in the vicinity of Sonchu, North Korea. The U.S. Army declared Meyers deceased March 2, 1954. In 1954, United Nations and communist forces exchanged the remains of war dead in what came to be called "Operation Glory." All remains recovered in Operation Glory were turned over to the Army's Central Identification Unit for analysis. The remains they were unable to identify were interred as unknowns at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, known as the "Punchbowl." In 2012, due to advances in technology, the Department of Defense began to re-examine records and concluded that the possibility of identification for some of these unknowns now existed. To identify Meyers' remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence, dental analysis, and chest radiographs, which matched Meyers' records.

The remains of a formerly missing U.S. soldier have been returned to California nearly 65 years after he is thought to have died, the Long Beach Press-Telegram reported. The remains of Army Cpl. Robert V. Witt, a 20-year-old Bellflower man missing since the Korean War, were returned earlier this week to his sister Laverne Minnick, 82, the paper reported. Minnick, who lives in Huntington Beach, told the newspaper: "I am so happy. He's going to be home, where he belongs, with his family." Witt will be buried with full military honors at Rose Hills Memorial Park in Whittier on Friday. In late November 1950, Witt was assigned to 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division, the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency said in a statement. They were attacked by Chinese forces at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. On Dec. 1, 1950, remnants of the 31st Regimental Combat Team tried moving to a position south of the reservoir, but the next day, Witt was reported missing in action, the statement said. In 1953, during prisoner of war exchanges, repatriated U.S. soldiers told officials that Witt had been captured during the battle and died from malnutrition. It's believed he died on Jan. 31, 1951. [Source: The Associated Press | October 25, 2015 ++]

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 13 OCT that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. George H. Mason, 19, of Byhalia, Miss., will be buried Oct. 20, in his hometown. In early February 1951, Mason was assigned to 2nd Reconnaissance Company, 2nd Infantry Division, and was deployed near Chuam-ni, South Korea, when their defensive line was attacked by Chinese forces. This attack forced the unit to withdraw south to a more defensible position. Mason was reported as missing in action Feb. 14, 1951. On June 22, 1951, the People's Republic of China announced in a radio broadcast that Mason had been captured by enemy forces.

In 1953, during the prisoner of war exchanges historically known as “Operation Little Switch” and “Operation Big Switch,” returning U.S. soldiers who had been held as prisoners of war did not have any information concerning Mason. When no further evidence supporting his capture was available, a military review board amended his status to presumed dead. Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea returned 208 boxes of commingled human remains to the United States, which we now believe contain the remains of at least 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents included in the repatriation indicate that some of the remains were recovered from the area where men captured from Mason’s unit were believed to have died.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced today that the remains of a U.S. soldier, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. Grant H. Ewing, 28, of Fort Lupton, Colo., will be buried Oct. 19, in his hometown. In late November 1950, Ewing was assigned to Battery C, 38th Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division (ID), which was deployed north and east of the town of Kunu-ri, North Korea. On Nov. 25, 1950, 2nd ID was attacked by Chinese forces, which forced the unit to withdraw south to a more defensible position. Before they could disengage, the 2nd ID was forced to fight through a series of Chinese roadblocks, commonly known as “the Gauntlet”. Ewing was reported missing in action during this battle. In 1953, as part of a prisoner of war exchange known as Operation Big Switch, returning American soldiers who had been held as prisoners of war reported that Ewing was among the many men captured by Chinese forces and died in February 1951, in prisoner of war Camp 5, in Pyoktong, North Korea. His remains were not among those returned by communist forces during Operation Glory in 1954.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains now believed to contain more than 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents turned over with some of the boxes indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where Ewing was believed to have died. To identify Ewing’s remains, scientists from the DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, dental comparison, and two forms of DNA analysis including; mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome Short Tandem Repeat DNA (Y-STR) analysis, which matched his brother.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 28 SEP that the remains of a U.S. soldier, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Sgt. Christopher Y. Vars, 40, of Chelsea, Mass., will be buried Oct. 6, in Everett, Mass. In late 1950, Vars was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division (ID), which was deployed north and east of the town of Kunu-ri, North Korea. On Nov. 27, 1950, 2nd ID was forced to withdraw south to a more defensible position after being attacked by Chinese forces. Before they could disengage, the 2nd ID had to fight through a series of Chinese roadblocks, commonly known as “the Gauntlet.” Vars was reported missing in action during the battle. In

1953, during a prisoner of war exchange, returning American soldiers who had been held as prisoners of war reported that Vars was not among the many men captured and held as prisoners.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains now believed to contain at least 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents turned over with some of the boxes indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where captured soldiers from Var's unit were believed to have died. To identify Vars' remains, scientists from the DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and two forms of DNA analysis including; mitochondrial DNA, which matched his cousins, and Y-chromosome Short Tandem Repeat DNA (Y-STR) analysis, which matched his nephews.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced on 9 AUG the identification of remains belonging to Sgt Wilson Meckley, Jr. He was assigned U.S. Army Company A, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, North Korea on 12/2/1950 and reported missing on 8/9/2015.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced on 8 OCT the identification of Army Sgt. 1st Class Dean D. Chaney, from Ohio, who was declared missing while fighting in North Korea on Nov. 28, 1950. It would be later learned he had been captured, but died in a POW camp. He was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of Army Cpl. George H. Mason, who was assigned to the 2nd Reconnaissance Company, 2nd Infantry Division, died while fighting in North Korea on Feb. 14, 1951.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 2 NOV the remains of U.S. serviceman Army Cpl. Martin A. King, unaccounted for from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. King, 18, of Harrisburg, Pa., will be buried Nov. 9 in Annville, Pa. In early November 1950, he was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, when his unit was attacked by Chinese forces while occupying a position along the Nammyon River, near Unsan, North Korea. King was reported missing in action on Nov. 2, 1950, while his unit was conducting a fighting withdrawal to a more defensible position. In 1953, during the prisoner of war exchanges historically known as "Operation Little Switch" and "Operation Big Switch," American soldiers who were returned told debriefers that King had been captured during the battle and died from malnutrition at Pyoktong POW Camp. His remains were not among those returned by communist forces in 1954.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea returned to the United States 208 boxes of commingled human remains, which we now believe contain the remains of at least 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents included in the repatriation indicated that

some of the remains were recovered from the area where King was believed to have died. To identify King's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including mitochondrial and Y-chromosome short tandem repeat DNA analyses, which matched his brother.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 30 OCT that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Pfc. Frank Worley, 21, of Wilmington, N.C., will be buried Nov. 6 in Salisbury, N.C. On Feb. 11, 1951, Worley and elements of Battery A, 503rd Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division (ID), were occupying a position in the vicinity of Hoengsong, South Korea, when their unit was overwhelmed by Chinese forces. This attack caused the 2nd ID to withdraw south to a more defensible position. Worley was reported missing after the attack. In 1953, during the prisoner of war exchanges historically known as "Operation Little Switch" and "Operation Big Switch," returning American soldiers did not have any information concerning Worley. A military review board amended his status to deceased in March 1954. Worley's remains were also not among those returned by communist forces during "Operation Glory" in 1954.

Between 1990 and 1994, North Korea returned to the United States 208 boxes of commingled human remains, which we now believe contain the remains of at least 600 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents included in the repatriation indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where men captured from Worley's unit were believed to have died. In the identification of Worley's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence, dental comparison, and forensic identification tools, including mitochondrial DNA analysis and Y-chromosome short tandem repeat DNA analysis, which matched his brothers.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains belonging Cpl. Robert P. Graham, of San Francisco, who was declared missing in North Korea on Feb. 13, 1951. It was later learned he had been captured, but died in captivity. He was assigned to Company A, 13th Engineer Combat Battalion, 7th Infantry Division. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 23 Sep that the remains of a serviceman, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Sgt. 1st Class Robert Reager, 20, of Coraopolis, Penn., will be buried Sept. 28, in Bridgeville, Penn. On Dec. 1, 1950, Reager was assigned to Company C, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT), 7th Infantry Division. The 31st RCT was deployed east of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, when it was engaged by overwhelming numbers of Chinese forces. In late November 1950, remnants of the 31st RCT, known historically as Task Force Faith, began a fighting withdrawal to more defensible positions near Hagaru-ri, south of the reservoir. On Dec. 2, 1950, Reager was

reported as missing in action. In 1953, as part of a prisoner of war exchange, returning American soldiers who had been held as prisoners of war reported that Reager was not among the many men captured and held as prisoners. When no further information pertaining to Reager was provided, a military review board later amended Reager's status to deceased. From April 28 through May 10, 2004, a joint U.S./Democratic People's Republic of North Korea excavated several secondary burial sites in the vicinity of the Pungnyu-ri inlet of the Chosin Reservoir, and recovered remains of possible U.S. servicemen who fought during the battles at the reservoir. To identify Reager's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and two forms of DNA analysis including; mitochondrial DNA, which matched his brother and two cousins, and Y-chromosome Short Tandem Repeat DNA (Y-STR) analysis, which matched his brother.

World War II

Missing Medal of Honor Recipient Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency has announced the identification of remains belonging to Marine Corps 1st Lt. Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman, 33, of Knoxville, Tenn., who would be posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions fighting on the Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands, Nov. 11, 1943. He was assigned to Company F, 2nd Battalion, 18th Marines Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. His remains, and that of possibly three dozen other Americans, were recovered by History Flight, a Florida based nonprofit organization that is assisting U.S. government MIA search and recovery efforts through an expanded public-private partnership opportunity. The lieutenant will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced on 15 OCT the identification of Army Pvt. John H. Klopp, 25, from New Orleans, La., who was declared missing while fighting on Papua New Guinea on Dec. 5, 1942. He was assigned to the 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Infantry Division.

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains belonging to Marine Corps Cpl. James D. Otto. He was assigned to Company L, 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines, 2nd Marine Division and was killed in action on Nov. 20, 1943, while fighting on the Pacific island of Tarawa. Cpl. Otto is being returned home for burial with full military honors at a time and date yet to be determined

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 9 NOV that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, unaccounted for since World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Marine Cpl. Roger K. Nielson, 22, of Denver, will be buried Nov. 16, in his hometown. In November 1943, Nielson was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll, in an attempt to secure the island. Over several days of intense fighting, approximately 1,000 Marines were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Nielson was reported killed on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943.

In the immediate aftermath of the fighting on Tarawa, U.S. service members who died in the battle were buried in a number of battlefield cemeteries on the island. In 1946 and 1947, the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company conducted remains recovery operations on Betio Island, but Nielson's remains were not recovered. On Feb. 10, 1949, a military review board declared Nielson nonrecoverable.

In June 2015, History Flight, Inc., a non-governmental organization, notified DPAA that they discovered a burial site on Betio Island and recovered the remains of what they believed were U.S. Marines who fought during the battle in November 1943. The remains were turned over to DPAA in July 2015. To identify Nielson's remains, scientists from DPAA used laboratory analysis, to include dental comparisons, which matched Nielson's records, as well as circumstantial and material evidence.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 2 NOV that the remains of U.S. serviceman Marine Pfc. James P. Reilly, unaccounted for since World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Reilly, 20, of New York, will be buried 9 NOV in Bushnell, Fla. In November 1943, he was assigned to Company L, 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll, in an attempt to secure the island. Over several days of intense fighting, approximately 1,000 Marines were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Reilly was reported killed on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943. In the immediate aftermath of the fighting on Tarawa, U.S. service members who died in the battle were buried in a number of battlefield cemeteries on the island. In 1946 and 1947, the 604th Quartermaster Graves Registration Company conducted remains recovery operations on Betio Island, but Reilly's remains were not recovered. On Feb. 10, 1949, a military review board declared Reilly non-recoverable. In June 2015, a nongovernmental organization, History Flight, Inc., notified DPAA that they discovered a burial site on Betio Island and recovered the remains of what they believed were 36 U.S. Marines who fought during the battle in November 1943. The remains were turned over to DPAA in July 2015. To identify Reilly's remains, scientists from DPAA used laboratory analysis, to include dental comparisons, which matched Reilly's records, as well as circumstantial and material evidence, and personal effects recovered during the recovery operations that correlated to Reilly.

Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 3 NOV that the remains of U.S. serviceman Army Air Forces 1st Lt. William O. Pile, missing from World War II, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Pile, 24, of Circleville, Ohio, will be buried Nov. 10 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. On Dec. 23, 1944, he was assigned to the 559th Bombardment Squadron, 387th Bombardment Group, 9th Air Force, and was deployed to Germany. Pile was the pilot of a B-26C Marauder, with eight other crewmen onboard, which crashed after being struck by enemy fire while on a bombing mission against enemy forces near Philippsweiler, Germany. Pile and his co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert Ward, were reported killed in action. The other seven crewmen

survived the crash by parachuting to safety; however, one crewman was captured by enemy forces and was reported to have died in captivity. His remains were later returned to U.S. custody. Pile and Ward were not recovered during the war.

In April 2009, a Department of Defense (DoD) team traveled to Philippsweiler to interview several German locals who recalled an American war-time crash. The team surveyed the possible crash site. Between June 2010 and July 2011, two DoD recovery teams excavated the suspected crash site, recovering human remains and aircraft wreckage. To identify Pile's remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and exclusion by mitochondrial DNA testing on a second set of remains associated with Ward. [Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | NOV 2015 ++]

VA Undersecretary for Benefits ► Resigns Amid New Scandal

Allison Hickey, the Veterans Affairs Department's top benefits official and arguably the most polarizing figure in the VA leadership ranks in recent years, abruptly stepped down from her post 16 OCT amid praise from colleagues and renewed attacks from critics. The move came as House lawmakers prepared to subpoena her to discuss the VA's latest management scandal, allegations that senior managers abused an employee relocation program to gain questionable promotions and bonuses.

As VA benefits chief, Hickey oversaw more than 20,000 employees and the delivery of benefits to more than 12 million veterans and their families. She is one of the last holdovers from former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki's tenure, often praised by top officials for her efforts to modernize the department and her dedication to veterans. "She has been an exceptional colleague and an even better friend to me," VA Secretary Bob McDonald said in a statement. "Her commitment to excellence and service to our country is unquestioned." But her work also drew intense criticism from conservatives in Congress and some veterans advocates, who blamed her for management failings within the Veterans Benefits Administration. In March 2013, Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, called for her resignation as the number of backlogged veterans' disability claims ballooned to more than 600,000. American Legion officials later followed suit. The same critics have renewed those calls after reports emerged about the relocation bonuses. A VA Inspector General report suggested Hickey should be investigated for negligent oversight of the program, and Miller's committee scheduled a hearing on the issue.

A senior VA official said those repeated requests have taken a toll on the 57-year-old Hickey, who worried she had become a distraction to further reform efforts. But VA leaders stressed that her resignation was her own decision, one that McDonald reluctantly accepted. They praised her steady leadership through an era of unprecedented VA transformation that has seen the number of veterans seeking benefits rise dramatically as the wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan have wound down. Since peaking in March 2013, the disability benefits backlog has fallen steadily each month, to just under 74,000 cases in October. Officials have credited that 88 percent drop in part to Hickey's modernization push, trading piles of paperwork for more automated electronic systems. "She has done a tremendous job rebuilding the morale of the VBA workforce amid some big challenges," the senior official said. "She has been both a leader and a shield for them."

In a farewell letter to employees, Hickey called her four-plus years both a challenge and a privilege. "There has never been a job I have been blessed to do that was so rich with purpose; no customer so honored to serve; no team so amazing to work alongside as this noble mission," she wrote. "But we aren't done yet. There is more to do, and that will take new, fresh thinking and energy from your next leader in VBA." Principal Deputy Undersecretary Danny Pummill has taken over as acting under secretary. Former VA Undersecretary for Benefits Allison Hickey was part of the first class of female cadets to graduate from the Air Force Academy in 1980, and rose to brigadier general during her 27-year military career. [Source: NavyTimes | Leo Shane III | 2 Nov 2015 ++]

Agent Orange Act Extension Update ► Provision Expires

The Agent Orange Act of 1991 (AOA) established a presumption of service connection for diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure, relieving Vietnam veterans from the burden of providing evidence that their illness was a result of military service. This law directs the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to periodically research and review diseases that might be associated with Agent Orange exposure. Under the Act the VA was required to add diseases the NAS found to have a positive association to Agent Orange exposure to the VA's list of presumptive service connected diseases. In early October, the House and Senate veterans affairs committees quietly allowed a provision of the Agent Orange Act of 1991 to expire. How significant that will be for Vietnam veterans and their benefits is disputed.

Committee staff and the Department of Veterans Affairs agree the change has not impacted the VA secretary's authority to decide to expand the list of diseases presumed connected to wartime herbicide exposure. But veteran advocates and at least one lawmaker suggest the change is intended to dampen VA cost risks and perhaps ease political pressure on the secretary and Congress facing a potential tsunami of disability claims. That scenario assumes that a final review of medical science will establish a stronger link between Agent Orange and hypertension (high blood pressure), a condition that the Center for Disease Control says is so common it afflicts a third of the U.S. adult population. VA had asked Congress to keep the Agent Orange law intact five more years. Rep. Timothy J. Walz (D MN), a VA committee member, offered a compromise, a bill to leave the law unchanged for two years, long enough so its secretarial review requirements held during VA consideration of a final report of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences on health conditions associated with Agent Orange.

The VA committees declined to back these delays because, said a House committee staff member, under separate law “the secretary already has authority to make such [presumption] decisions, and we felt he did not need to be compelled by [the Agent Orange] law to do so.” The provision that “sunset” 1 OCT required the secretary to adhere to certain standards and procedures in determining if additional diseases associated with herbicide exposure should be presumed service connected. Vietnam War veterans diagnosed with ailments on the presumptive list qualify for VA disability pay and medical care. The expired provision also set a timetable for the secretary to accept or reject IOM findings and required him to explain in writing if he declined to add IOM identified conditions to the presumptive list.

Walz told colleagues at a hearing last week they effectively “allowed the Agent Orange Act to expire” and “it’s altogether possible” the next IOM report, due in March, will support adding hypertension and stroke to the presumptive list. Consequently, Walz said, “literally hundreds of thousands of people” will be able to point to scientific data showing they experienced health consequences from exposure to Agent Orange. “And the pressure is going to be on,” he warned.

Turning to VA Secretary Bob McDonald, Walz advised that if Congress doesn’t “have the courage” to respond to the IOM findings, presumably with bigger VA budgets to cover the influx of claims, “they’re going to ask you. And much like the Nehmer claims, it’s going to add to your work.” Walz was referring to a federal court ruling, *Nehmer v. Department of Veterans Affairs*, which forced VA the last time it added conditions to its presumptive list, including heart disease and Parkinson’s, to review all previously filed claims for these conditions and make payments retroactive to original claim dates, or the date of the 1985 Nehmer decision, whichever is later. The scope and cost of this requirement surprised then-VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, as he later conceded. It also exploded the VA claims backlog.

So McDonald told Walz he had made “a very good point.” Earlier in the hearing McDonald noted that disability claims backlog still stood at 611,000 in May of 2013, but that VA finally had reduced it below 75,000. “If we add another pre-condition and we don’t get the people to do it, the 80-plus-percent progress we’ve made on the backlog will go away,” McDonald testified. Walz sympathized, saying he might face a tough decision resulting in many new claims. McDonald said how Congress responds would be key. “We prefer to do what’s right for the veteran, and then have you help us get the people we need for the job,” McDonald said. No one interviewed was certain what the next IOM report will recommend. Regardless of those findings, or the Agent Orange law change, the secretary still will have authority to expand the list of presumptive conditions, said David R. McLenachen, VA deputy undersecretary for disability assistance, in a phone interview 14 OCT. “It’s always good to have it straight in the law, set up clearly, what our authority is regarding the Agent Orange Act,” McLenachen said. That’s why VA didn’t want the provision to expire on 1 OCT. But the secretary still has general rulemaking authority that “allows us, even while these provisions are expired, to add presumptions,” he said.

Barton Stichman, joint executive director of the National Veterans Services Legal Program, a nonprofit group that fights for veterans' benefits, said there is reason to be concerned that the secretary no longer is required by law to consider IOM findings on presumptive diseases, that whatever he decides doesn't have to be explained, and he will have no deadline to decide. From a practical standpoint, Stichman added, any secretary will feel pressured from veterans and support groups to act on IOM findings. But IOM did find "limited or suggested evidence of association" between hypertension and Agent Orange in 2006, and while other conditions with the same degree of association became presumptive, hypertension did not. About 2.6 million veterans served in Vietnam. Most are still alive. Current law presumes that all of them have been exposed to Agent Orange. VA grants disability ratings of 10 to 60 percent for hypertension, depending on severity, and the Center for Disease Control says high blood pressure grows more common as any population ages. So will this secretary, or future VA secretaries, feel at least as much pressure from Congress to hold down disability costs as VA budgets tighten as he does from advocates for Vietnam veterans?

The Congressional Budget Office apparently heard the same rumors as Walz about the next IOM report and hypertension. Walz wasn't available to be interviewed but a member of his staff said costs were a committee consideration for not embracing his bill. In informal discussions, she said, CBO analysts had raised the specter of added costs "in the billions" if the secretarial review provision of the Agent Orange law didn't expire. Asked to comment, a House committee staff member said, "CBO has not released an official cost estimate, and we can't speculate regarding potential costs associated with a report [IOM] has not produced. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | 15 Oct 2015 ++]

VA Benefits: Outcome Measures and More Outreach Would Enhance the Post-9/11 On-the-Job Training and Apprenticeship Programs

What GAO Found

In 2011, Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits—initially available only for higher education—were expanded to cover on-the-job training (OJT) and apprenticeship programs. Veterans surveyed and interviewed by GAO for its November 2015 report said the Post-9/11 OJT and apprenticeship programs helped them transition to civilian life. In addition, employers and apprenticeship sponsors who responded to GAO's surveys cited a number of benefits for participating, including recruitment and retention. Of the approximately 1.2 million veterans who used their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits since October 2011, about 27,000—or about 2 percent—participated in OJT or apprenticeship programs, according to VA program data.

GAO also found that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) primarily provides information about the OJT and apprenticeship programs through mandatory briefings for transitioning servicemembers and on its website. While VA's outreach efforts include some information on these programs, VA's mandatory briefings and web resources generally emphasize higher

education and lack sufficient detail for veterans to reasonably understand how to use their GI Bill benefits for OJT and apprenticeships. State officials GAO surveyed reported conducting outreach in a variety of ways, such as attending job fairs and speaking to veterans' groups. However, without more detailed information on these programs, veterans may not be able to fully understand these benefits.

Key challenges faced by veterans and employers in using these programs include lack of awareness and administrative burdens, according to state officials, veterans, and employers GAO surveyed. Most state officials surveyed reported that veterans' lack of awareness about the programs is a primary challenge they face in facilitating veteran (39 of 44) and employer (39 of 43) participation. Further, over half of state officials surveyed (24 of 42) cited challenges related to VA's current paper-based processing system, which requires employers to fax or mail monthly forms to VA in order for a veteran to receive benefits. In addition, 11 of 15 employers and apprenticeship sponsors GAO interviewed said the process is burdensome or inefficient, and 6 of 28 veterans GAO interviewed said their benefits have sometimes been delayed. VA is developing a new data system, but it may not be implemented until 2017 at the earliest, according to VA officials, and administrative challenges in the interim could hinder program participation.

In addition, little is known about the performance of VA's Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs because VA does not measure program outcomes, such as whether participants retain employment after completing the program. Absent such information, GAO examined Department of Labor (DOL) outcome data for its related OJT and apprenticeship programs, which indicate the potential for positive outcomes for these training models. Federal standards for internal control call for establishing and reviewing performance measures to allow an agency to evaluate relevant data and take appropriate actions. Without such measures, VA is limited in its ability to assess its programs.

Why GAO Did This Study

As the military draws down its forces, many veterans will enter the civilian workforce and may seek educational and training opportunities to further their transition into civilian jobs. Because pursuing a higher education degree may not be the best path for some veterans, the Post-9/11 GI Bill OJT and apprenticeship programs provide alternative opportunities.

This testimony is based on GAO's November 2015 report on this topic and provides (1) a description of how selected veterans and employers have used the Post-9/11 OJT and apprenticeship programs and how widely the programs have been used; (2) an assessment of the extent to which VA and states have taken steps to inform veterans and employers about these programs; (3) information about the challenges veterans and employers reported facing in using the programs; and (4) an analysis of the extent to which VA has assessed the performance and effectiveness of the programs.

For its November 2015 report, GAO analyzed VA and DOL program data; surveyed state officials in all 44 states responsible for overseeing VA's OJT and apprenticeship programs; conducted non-generalizable surveys of randomly selected veterans and employers; conducted site visits in 2 states and interviewed state officials from an additional 11 states selected for their range in number of OJT and apprenticeship programs and geographic location; and analyzed outreach materials related to these programs.

What GAO Recommends

In its November 2015 report, GAO recommended that VA improve outreach, ease administrative challenges, and establish outcome measures for its OJT and apprenticeship program. VA agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with all three recommendations.